



Religious Texts and the Swearing-In Tradition

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Day to Day, December 5, 2006 · Keith Ellison of Minnesota became the first Muslim elected to Congress last month, and he plans to use the Quran instead of the Bible when he's sworn in. Some are outraged about straying from the tradition of using the Bible to swear in government officials. But that tradition isn't as solid as some might think.

MIKE PESCA, host:

The conservative airwaves and liberal blogs have been buzzing this week. No it's not just that it's only three weeks before the war on Christmas. Today's cause of grave concern is that Keith Ellison, a congressman-elect from Minnesota will use the Quran not the Bible when he takes his oath of office this January.

NPR's Luke Burbank reports.

LUKE BURBANK: Ever since the polls closed on election night and it started to become apparent just how large Democratic gains were going to be. Ever since that moment conservative talk radio has been more or less playing defense.

Their spirits have been - well a little low - until last week that is.

(Soundbite of music)

Mr. DENNIS PRAGER (Conservative Columnist; Radio Host): And hello everybody and welcome to the Dennis Prager show, good to be with you.

BURBANK: Dennis Prager is a conservative columnist and radio host here in L.A.

Mr. PRAGER: I have written, I don't know, 1,000 articles in my life, and I cannot recall a bigger fuss made over any as the one that I wrote this week.

BURBANK: The column, written for Townhall.com, criticized soon-to-be Democratic Congressman Keith Ellison, the first Muslim elected to the House. What really got Prager and some other conservatives upset is the fact that Ellison isn't planning on using a Christian Bible for his swearing-in.

Mr. PRAGER: It is a symbol since George Washington did it. It is something that we do, that Americans do to affirm their American-ness.

BURBANK: The title of Prager's column was "America, Not Keith Ellison, Decides What Book a Congressman Takes his Oath On."

Mr. FRED BEUTTLER (Deputy Historian, House of Representatives): I'd respond to that that America has decided.

BURBANK: Fred Beuttler would know. He's deputy historian of the House of Representatives.

Mr. BEUTTLER: And America has decided through its members of Congress that there is no official book that a member has to swear on when they take their oath of office.

BURBANK: Beuttler says most people are kind of confused as to how the actual swearing-in goes. They've seen the presidential inauguration on TV. They think that's how it works in Congress, but it doesn't.

Mr. BEUTTLER: In the House, what happens is on the first day, when

a new Congress convenes every two years, the speaker is sworn in and then the speaker then swears in the rest of the Congressman en masse.

BURBANK: Do they have like a giant, you know, 100-person Bible that everyone puts their hand on?

(Soundbite of laughter)

Mr. BEUTTLER: No.

BURBANK: Okay, does everybody - everybody just grab a script, please.

Since I couldn't find any actual tape of Congress taking the oath, I did the next best thing.

Okay, so I'll be like - I'm going to be like Nancy Pelosi here, okay?

I got together some members of the DAY TO DAY production staff for a dramatic re-enacting.

I do solemnly swear.

Unidentified People: I do solemnly swear.

BURBANK: So, imagine it, the Congressman and -women standing at their desks, Bible-less, Quran-less, book-less, let's say. They take their oath. It's a big moment, the reward for many years of hard work. There's just one problem, says Fred Beuttler.

Mr. BEUTTLER: Pictures aren't allowed on the House floor.

BURBANK: That's right. These poor congress people don't even get a Polaroid commemorating the event. That's where the photo-op oath comes in.

Mr. BEUTTLER: In the past, what speakers have done is allowed individual members to do an informal, unofficial swearing-in ceremony, kind of a re-enactment.

BURBANK: That voluntary ceremony, that photo-op, essentially, is what Keith Ellison is planning on bringing a Quran to. And he won't even be the first person to bring something other than a Christian Bible to the ceremony. Debbie Wasserman Schultz, a Florida Democrat, used a Hebrew Bible for her photo-op, and when Teddy Roosevelt took his presidential oath way back when, he didn't even use a Bible. In the rush after McKinley's death, they couldn't find one.

Luke Burbank, NPR News.

Unidentified People: I will faithfully discharge...

(Soundbite of laughter)

BURBANK: Try that one again.